

# Rethinking Residency in the Age of Online Learning

by Kathleen Matheos  
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### **About Canadian Virtual University /Université virtuelle canadienne**

Canadian Virtual University-Université virtuelle canadienne is a consortium of Canadian universities dedicated to increasing access to university education through delivery of complete programs online and through distance education.

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This report is accessible electronically on [the Canadian Virtual University](http://www.cvu-uvc.ca/) website at <http://www.cvu-uvc.ca/>

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## **Abstract**

This report provides an overview of residency requirements in Canadian post-secondary institutions, surveying both historical and present day practices. It draws upon the literature, an online seminar, and interviews with academics, administrators, and students from both open and traditional institutions, and presents perspectives for both maintaining and changing current practices as online choices increase. It highlights how four national consortia, Canadian Virtual University (CVU-UVC), Collaboration for Online Higher Education and Research (COHERE), Canadian Virtual College Consortium (CVCC), and Campus Canada are creatively addressing issues of student mobility and residency.

These consortia allow like-minded institutions to begin to address long-held positions and policies on transfer credit and residency. These initiatives are congruent with the Government of Canada's innovation strategy, which links accessibility, flexibility, and portability of post-secondary education to national productivity.

The following specific recommendations also flow from this discussion:

**A national transfer credit database, with associated meta-data processes, should be developed to support transfer credit and student mobility across provinces and territories.**

**A national task force should be established to undertake ongoing activities to improve mobility and portability of learning, for instance, the development of innovative transfer credit protocols, and to develop common definitions and criteria for residency to be applicable across Canada.**

**Inter-institutional and inter-consortia initiatives should be supported in their efforts to increase accessibility, flexibility, and portability of post-secondary education.**



# Rethinking Residency in the Age of Online Learning

## Introduction

The government of Canada in two recent papers, “[Achieving Excellence](#)” and “[Knowledge Matters](#),” has expressed its support for flexible learning to ensure an educated and productive workforce. In particular, it sees credit transfer, prior learning assessment (PLA), residency, and recognition of foreign credentials as crucial issues. Growth, diversity, mobility, and accessibility are key features of a vibrant post-secondary system:

*Recent progress toward a coherent system of credential recognition policies and practices among post-secondary institutions can be accelerated to remove constraints on the mobility of students and workers.*

*The Government of Canada wishes to explore with provinces and territories how best to enhance the mobility of students and adult learners by facilitating the transfer of credits among institutions and the recognition of prior learning and experience.*

The [e-learning e-volution in colleges and universities](#) report, prepared by the Advisory Committee for Online Learning for the Council of Ministers of Education and Industry Canada, also articulates the importance of portability of university credits, particularly within an e-learning environment while preserving the high quality of Canadian post-secondary education:

*Our institutions and provincial and territorial governments can and should work together to develop new transfer agreements applicable in each province and territory and across the entire country to facilitate both true portability for learners and the removal of barriers to online learning, while continuing the commitment to quality in accreditation decisions.*

Building upon the Pan-Canadian Protocol, most universities and colleges allow transfer credits at the first- and second-year level. In addition, universities have also entered into agreements with

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1. See Appendix A

colleges to allow block transfer credits of certificate and diploma programs. The Ontario College-University Degree Completion Accord (1999) provided a foundation for relationships between colleges and universities within Ontario. More recently a College-University Consortium Council Forum (March 2002) brought together representatives from community colleges, universities, government, and other interested parties to discuss the current state of articulation and credit transfer arrangements in Ontario and examine current thinking about future developments.

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*A mobile, mature student body, combined with greater accessibility through technology-enhanced learning, will increase pressure on post-secondary institutions to re-visit current policies around transfer credit, PLA, and residency.*

Despite these policies, the number of credits awarded by these means still varies greatly depending on the institution and the program of study. In addition, there is a notable absence of discussion of the issue of "residency": the number and type of credits in a program that must be taken at the institution awarding the credential.

A mobile, mature student body, combined with greater accessibility through technology-enhanced learning, will increase pressure on post-secondary institutions to re-visit current policies around transfer credit, PLA, and residency.

Online learning and its concomitant facilitation of flexibility bring issues of residency to the forefront of academic and productivity strategy.

The following short review of residency policy explains its roots in academic practice and the external environment presently challenging it.

## **Early 1900s: A Sense of Place**

*Residency was intended to be compulsory, except in the case of students residing with parents or guardian in Toronto or the vicinity: but one gathers that this regulation was not enforced. Under these circumstances, a real collegiate life, of the English type, began to grow up. That indefinable thing, "a college spirit," began to be evolved; and college songs, indigenous to Toronto, were manufactured and sung. (Wallace, 1927)*

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At the University of Saskatchewan, early calendars (1914) state the following:

*The university is building a residence for students to be completed in 1914. All students not residing with relatives or friends or in the University Residence are required to reside in approved lodging houses.*

*All students are required to report their place of residence to the President within two weeks of the opening of classes. (University of Saskatchewan calendar 1914).*

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the term residency was very much a sense of place, and the residences at universities and colleges were a critical part of the educational process. Residential universities were the norm and the majority of the student body comprised of young, male, sequential students from a privileged sector of society. The experience of residency was part of making the “college man:” students living with their masters and mimicking patterns of thought and conversation. The residences were an extension of the college culture, where relationships among students, and between students and faculty were critical components of student life.

Residence life was also subject to a strict code of moral behaviour, perhaps drawing upon the ecclesiastical parentage of institutions. Rules and regulations governed what to eat, when to eat, when to study, and when to sleep. Failure to comply with these regulations could mean the end of one’s academic career and experience.

## **Early Challenges to Residency**

There were, however, even in the late 1800s, opportunities for non-residential study. Queens University began its correspondence degree programs in 1889, and individuals could complete degree programs without ever attending the residential campus of Queens. Today, Queens continues to offer full degree programs to non-resident students and their calendar states, “Each course offered by the Division of Continuing and Distance Studies counts for degree credit in the same way as does the equivalent course offered during the day.”

Extra-mural studies were provided within universities such as Saskatchewan and Alberta, built on the land grant model, in which extension and outreach were central. However, while these courses counted towards degree credentials, students were only allowed to take five full credits (one year of study in an extra-mural setting) and were required to complete their degree study on campus at the University of Saskatchewan. Similar policies of limited study were in place for correspondence learning. The early calendars also acknowledged transfer students and provided advanced standing for students with credentials from other recognized universities.

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*In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the term residency was very much a sense of place, and the residences at universities and colleges were a critical part of the educational process.*

The examples above are typical of Canadian universities of that era. Residency was defined in terms of the residential experience, and the few institutions that offered some form of alternative delivery (extra-mural or correspondence study) limited the number of courses that could be used towards a credential. The exception, of course, was Queens, which, from the onset, provided full degree options by alternative delivery as an integral part of their institution.

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*The combination of an increased population, coupled with the Federal Student Loan system resulted in a larger, more diverse student population.*

## **The 1960s: Growth, Diversity, Mobility, and Accessibility**

Canadian universities underwent great changes in the 1960s. That decade marked the entry of the generation of children born immediately after World War II into the post-secondary system. This increased population of potential university students resulted in the establishment of several new universities, such as Simon Fraser, York, Laurentian, and Trent. The combination of an increased population, coupled with the Federal Student Loan system resulted in a larger, more diverse student population. Moreover, Canadians were more mobile than in the previous decades. A greater number of students might, for the first time, commence study in one institution and complete it at another.

Simultaneously, Canadian universities saw the emergence of units responsible for providing alternative delivery,<sup>2</sup> with a focus on accessibility. In 1968 the University of Waterloo initiated its Correspondence Program, through which academic units could offer component courses of entire degree programs. In the 1960s, Memorial University of Newfoundland and the University of British Columbia began alternative delivery, and the University of Manitoba and the University of Saskatchewan expanded their correspondence model, which had been in place since the 1930s (Rothe, 1986; Seaborne & Zukernick, 1986).

In the 1970s more campus-based universities, such as Brandon, Laurentian, and Victoria, began offering credit courses through distance education; and new universities were established that specialized in the development and delivery of university degrees through distance education. In 1970, Athabasca University was established; in 1972, Télé-Université began

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2. Alternative delivery encompasses all delivery modes outside the traditional on-campus format delivery, ranging from print-based correspondence to net-based forms of delivery.

distance education services; and in 1974, the Open Learning Agency was established.

This rapid growth of alternative delivery (primarily correspondence) required institutions to rethink residency. In the case of traditional universities, would courses offered by correspondence be equivalent to and count in the same manner as an on-campus course? Should colleges and faculties limit the number of correspondence courses, requiring a portion of the degree study to be completed on campus? In the case of distance universities, such as Athabasca University, residency clearly could not be defined in terms of place.

By the 1960s, university and college calendars included residency in their academic regulations. The University of Saskatchewan (1968) prescribed that students must complete 10 of 15 credits (based on five credits per year) at that institution in order to convocate with a three-year degree. Clauses requiring students to seek permission to take courses at other than home institutions emerged at the same time, as did the process around Letters of Permission (LOPs).

Residency, however, continued to be defined in two ways: the number of credits *offered by* (sponsored) the institution from which one wished to graduate and the number of credits *offered at* (face to face on-campus) the institution from which one wished to graduate. The operative words were *at* and *by*. Some institutions chose to follow the Queens' model, considering all credit—regardless of delivery mode—in their course calendar as credits towards the residency requirement of that institution, while other institutions required physical residence for a period of time or a number of credits.

In the case of non-traditional universities, residency was well delineated in a client-accessible manner. At Athabasca University (AU) and the Open University of BC (OUBC), traditional concepts of “residence” have always been irrelevant: for OUBC, the requirement is six credits (equivalent to two semester courses), and at AU, 25 per cent of courses must be AU courses to meet degree regulations, except for the Bachelor of General Studies degree (no residence) and the Bachelor of Nursing, post RN degree (15 credits).

## The 1990s: Changing Demographics and Emergent Technologies

If the 1960s witnessed a growing and diverse student population, coupled with a growing complement of extra-mural and correspondence credit courses, the 1990s saw the rapid emergence of learning technologies and the introduction of online learning. This explosion of technologies was coupled with changing student demographics, reflected in an older, more mobile, technologically astute, and assertive student body. Many of these students would take courses from several institutions, pursuing a credential through the accumulation of credits.

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*...the 1990s saw the rapid emergence of learning technologies and the introduction of online learning.*

In 1994, a national transfer credit initiative was introduced. Participants at the First National Consultation on Education agreed “that the Council of Ministers of Education address, on a priority basis, the removal of barriers to post-secondary student mobility among Canadian provinces and territories, including barriers to the transferability of university credits.” The result was the Pan-Canadian Protocol on the Transferability of University Credit (1995), which provides for a model for transfer credit for the first two years of study among accredited Canadian institutions.

Provincial initiatives to facilitate transfer credit within provinces have existed for some time. The [Alberta Council on Admission and Transfer](#) published its first transfer guide in 1976. In 1989, the [British Columbia Council on Admissions and Transfers](#) began publishing its transfer credit guide. In 1993, the Ontario Council for Universities endorsed its Transfer Credit Policy. This policy states:

*Acceptance of transfer credits among Ontario universities shall be based on the recognition that, while learning experiences may differ in a variety of ways, their substance may be essentially equivalent in terms of their content and rigor. Insofar as possible, acceptance of transfer credits should allow for the maximum recognition of previous learning experiences in university-level courses.<sup>3</sup>*

Individual institutions (e.g., [Brandon University Transfer Credit Database](#) and [Athabasca University Credit Transfer Information System](#)) offer public-view transfer-credit databases, displaying

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3. <http://www.queensu.ca/secretariat/senate/policies/transfer.html>

transfer credit equivalencies for hundreds of courses from both Canadian and international institutions.

These national, provincial, and institutional transfer credit protocols have been in place for many years and still the government of Canada is calling for “new” initiatives to facilitate transfers of credit. Clearly, more needs to be done to ensure that existing transfer credit protocols are more fully implemented, as students still face “major barriers and obstacles to the transferability and mobility of learning” (Watt and Bloom 2001). There is also a need for more provinces and individual institutions to develop online transfer-credit databases so that existing transfer-credit information is more accessible to learners and other institutions.

These efforts, however, do not address the emergent barrier of residency. Mobility and accessibility will remain limited until issues of residency are addressed by post-secondary institutions.

Although there is no formal agreement upon a definition of residency, there is an operational understanding that residency requirements can be met with courses *offered by* an institution as opposed to *offered at* an institution. Therefore, there is no longer a distinction as to the mode of delivery of courses. Many institutions appear to have an average residency requirement of 50 per cent of courses at the home institution,<sup>4</sup> but there is a range in the composition of this 50 per cent. In certain institutions, this 50 per cent must be comprised of upper-level courses within the major and minor discipline; in other institutions, this 50 per cent can be comprised of courses at any level of study.

Finally, discussions around residency are complicated by differing understandings of a course or credit. In some institutions, a course is one semester of study (three hours per week); in others, this is considered a half-course. The term credit hours has somewhat alleviated this problem, but some institutions still refer to five credits (five full courses comprising a full-year of study), rather than one year being 30 credit hours of study.

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4. Home institution refers to the institution from which the credential will be awarded (e.g., diploma or degree)

Institutions within the same province may have very different residency requirements. An example of this incongruity can be found at the three Manitoba universities. Within a 90-credit hour degree, (three full years of study) residency can be met as described:

- Brandon University through either the last 30 or 45 credit hours.

*...without a basis of comparison among residency policies, there is no foundation for negotiation or solutions..*

- University of Manitoba, depending upon the faculty or departmental regulations, through 50 per cent (specific requirement or course level dependent upon the department) of course work.

- University of Winnipeg through any 30 credit hours.

Within universities, there are also contradictory residency policies for transfer and non-transfer students. At the University of Waterloo, within a four-year degree, based on five credits per year (each credit being one full-year course) the following holds true:

- Transfer students may carry in 10 credits (10 full-year courses) towards a University of Waterloo degree.
- University of Waterloo students may only take five credits (five full-year courses) from another institution for credit in a UW degree.

Ivan Fillion, Acting President, Cambrian College, comments on the wide variation of residency requirements among Canadian universities and colleges saying, "There are almost as many residency policies as there are institutions." He is concerned that the lack of criteria and standardization in residency policy prohibits even initial discussion about the topic. Without a basis of comparison among residency policies, there is no foundation for negotiation or solutions.

## **Collaboration and Consortia**

The advent of online learning has spurred the development of collaboration and consortia among universities and colleges. Archer and Koczka (1994) found that the number of consortia in higher education in 1961 was only nine. This number grew to 134 in the early 1980s. These numbers declined in the late 1980s, but a recent University Continuing Education Association (UCEA) report indicated that consortia are again on the rise, presumably the result of online learning.

In the past two years alone, four new national consortia have been created: [Canadian Virtual University \(CVU\)](#), the [Collaboration for Online Higher Education Research \(COHERE\)](#), the [Canadian Virtual College Consortium](#), and Campus Canada (website under development).

These national consortia seek to advance education across provincial boundaries, but must do so within the member institution's policies and practices. These policies and practices were often in place prior to the advent of technology-enhanced learning initiatives. As a result, consortium members are working towards the development of policies and practices that recognize the impact of e-learning and the concurrent need for increased academic flexibility and portability. As well, they are collaborating in new course and program development, research, and marketing.

How do the members facilitate student mobility, accessibility, and flexibility while still ensuring adherence to their own institutional academic policies? Each consortium is comprised of partners with different histories and experiences of residency (see Appendix B for a description of these approaches). In the following sections, representatives from each consortium provide insight into their own institutions' academic and administrative perspectives on residency. But first, it is valuable to consider the student's perspective.

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*While the perspectives differ, all recognize the impact of online learning on their policies and practices around transfer credit and residency and the need to rethink existing protocols.*

## **The Student Perspective**

Matheos *et al.* (2000) in a discussion about rural learners and education at a distance state that:

*Rural students have identified transfer credit as the most problematic component in the completion of education at a distance. Students need to be able to pick and chose offerings from a variety of providers in order to complete an academic program. Those institutions that accommodate flexible residency and transfer credit policies will become the providers of choice for rural learners.*

Following are two student perspectives: one from Erin, a student at a traditional university accessing courses from an out-of-province traditional university; and a second from Angela, a

student in an open university who wished to bring courses taken at several other post-institutions together for accreditation.

Erin, a student at the University of Saskatchewan (U of S), is currently taking courses from an Ontario university. As a second-year student, she had the advantage of the Pan-Canadian Protocol and residency was not an issue, as it would have been if she had been in an upper year of study. She applied as a visiting student and requested a Letter of Permission to ensure

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*Students need to be able to pick and chose offerings from a variety of providers in order to complete an academic program..*

transferability of her courses into her program at the U of S. She was also required to provide the U of S with a course description/outline for courses which had not been evaluated for transfer credit. The process worked fairly smoothly with the exception of one course for which she could not get the required information in a timely fashion and was unable to register. A public view, national credit database, with associated meta-data processes, could alleviate this problem.

Erin saw the value in taking courses at an out-of-province institution and the benefit from exposure to a different academic culture and perspective. For example, of her Canadian history course, she says, "The Canadian history course was taught from an Ontario viewpoint. I was surprised that there was a difference between the two provinces. In particular, the perspective on Louis Riel was very different."

Angela began her studies in 1992 at Augustana University College in Alberta, completing two years of a three-year degree in psychology. She then transferred to the University of Alberta for her third year. She experienced problems with U of A accepting some of the Augustana courses but, nevertheless, transferred what courses she could and continued her studies at U of A.

After one year at the U of A, she withdrew from the program. She then completed a four month, pre-technology program at the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology and part of a two-year diploma program in business management. She was able to complete the final two courses for her Business Management Diploma through Athabasca University. Concurrently, she took up employment at AU and moved to Athabasca.

Now at AU, she enrolled in the Business Administration Post Diploma program, receiving a two-year block transfer and an additional six credits from her previous university study. She anticipates that she will graduate in 2003.

For Angela, the model at AU allowed her to apply her varied learning experiences towards an accreditation. Specifically, the

open admission and transfer credit policies met her needs. The only barrier that she experienced was residency, in that a minimum of eight three-credit courses must be taken at AU.

*I suppose my main concerns are that the courses I take are of value in the real world. As long as the quality of courses taken (accreditation) and applicability of them to the program (relevance), I don't really care where they were taken, and would like to be able to use studies from a wide range of institutions against a program. So residency requirements, for me as a student, are limiting.*

*As a staff member of AU, I understand why institutions may want to keep a number of residency requirements in a program. It would limit students (make them commit to a program/institution at a certain point) and reduce the amount of work needed in the evaluations completed at a certain point. I suppose it would also guarantee a certain amount of revenues, too.*

Both Erin's and Angela's comments reinforce the importance of a streamlined process for students to move between institutions and accumulate credit but each bringing a different perspective. For Erin, mobility enabled exposure to a different academic culture and perspective; for Angela, mobility allowed her to participate in modes of study congruent with her life and work schedule.

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## **An Open University Perspective**

### **Alan Davis**

With the ability of students to access online and distance courses from institutions from around the world (and all the potential therein to create choice and richness in each program of studies), and the emergence of virtual consortia of online institutions, the role of residence requirements needs further discussion.

There are usually four concerns expressed about the absence, or reduction, of residence. The first relates to a program's "credibility." However, when graduate follow-up is done on programs with minimal or no residence, the credibility and usefulness of the credentials awarded are not questioned.

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The second concern relates to the potential loss of registrations (and thus, tuition revenue) to the home institution. In fact, the absence of a residence requirement has little effect on most students' course-taking patterns-opening the door with respect to residence (or any other restrictive policy) always increases the flow of students to the university and its offerings.

Thirdly, residence requirement is invoked in order to ensure that a student, and his or her learning, can be validated directly and

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*The absence of a residence requirement has little effect on most students' course-taking patterns: opening the door with respect to residence actually creates new business for the university.*

not "third hand." This is a valid concern, especially where the information available on the transferred coursework is slim, and matching a student's learning with the program's outcomes (if they exist) is imprecise.

Lastly, concern is expressed by academics on how they can maintain a program's specific outcomes, coherence, integrity, and quality. For instance, if the ability to work collaboratively is a stated outcome of a program, the fit of a specific transfer course must take this into account: the basic content of the transfer course may be adequate, but the skills a student acquires in completing the course may not be, depending on the delivery mode. The same can be said for critical thinking, research skills, etc. Where it can be clearly defended, a student's preferred learning style, choice of institution, and need for flexibility may have to be set aside in order to ensure coherence and fit within a program.

There is a danger, therefore, of assuming a completely "open" policy of residence and transfer.

In the Bachelor of Nursing program at Athabasca University, for instance, residence is being re-defined in terms of being able to accurately measure and validate the specific competencies expected of a baccalaureate nurse, which represent the program's outcomes. The residence for the degree is thus not an arbitrary number of credits or percent of coursework, but the result of a careful evaluation of those competencies that can only be accurately measured through Athabasca coursework.

Other ways to balance openness and integrity is to use capstone exercises that deliberately ask students to demonstrate skills and integrate their knowledge, or to allow exceptions to residence through carefully considered letters of permission (i.e., courses that are pre-approved before being taken at a partner institution, and carefully evaluated with respect to the content and objectives). The role of the consortium then extends to having academics discuss their offerings with each other to see how they overlap, or not. Different approaches are also appropriate for, say, recent high school undergraduates as opposed to

working, part-time adult learners in graduate programs. The roles of academic advising, program planning, and learning assessment (all aspects of teaching) become more important when residence is treated in this way, perhaps at the expense of an academic's personal view of how students should and can learn.

Of course, this approach to defining residence presupposes that all university programs have clearly defined and understood outcomes. However, all universities, which are (to one degree or another) driven by a “research” agenda, cannot claim much moral high ground on the residency issue, since teaching and learning are given significantly less attention, and (at the undergraduate level at least) the impact of the research is hard to see. Few academic programs have any clearly defined and coherent outcomes against which a residence requirement can be effectively defended, except in very vague and general terms of maintaining “quality.”

Until such careful analysis and definition of competencies and outcomes occurs for each program, defending any residence requirements is simply a vague and somewhat emotional defence of tradition for its own sake, of institutional turf, and of sensitive egos, which, of course, is the sort of argumentation without evidence we would not accept from our students.

*Alan Davis,  
Chairperson of the Canadian Virtual University Advisory Board  
and Vice-President Academic, Athabasca University*

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*The role of the consortium then extends to having academics discuss their offerings with each other to see how they overlap, or not.*

## **A Traditional University Perspective**

### **Randy Garrison**

The potential currently exists for students to access virtually any course from any institution. Therefore, the issue is not access or even choice of courses. The challenge facing institutions of higher education is ensuring the quality and integrity of a program of studies. This includes the quality of particular courses as well as the structure and mix of courses (i.e., integrity) constituting a coherent program of study. This problem is created with students transferring from one institution to another (i.e., swirling) as well as selecting courses from among several institutions. The problem of swirling is not just students moving from one institution to another (definition of policy

analysts), but is also *virtually* moving from one institution to another in their selection of courses.

The issue of students being able to take courses randomly and constitute a program of studies based only on credit hours creates a problem of assessing the comprehensive quality of the degree. There is a need to maintain quality standards (from a course and program perspective) in light of the ability of students to take course credits from so many institutions. It is

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not easy or justifiable to unquestionably assess equivalencies and provide credit with the growing access and diversity of offerings and approaches to learning in higher education.

From the perspective of a research-intensive university, the *quality* standard for a course or program is that of an interactive and inquiry-based learning experience. More philosophically, this would be a collaborative-constructivist learning experience where students, through a process of sustained communication, have the opportunity to question existing ideas and beliefs (i.e., knowledge) and to share and test their understandings.

On the other hand, all institutions of higher education should be concerned with the *integrity* of their programs. Program integrity ensures that each student receives a coherent and balanced set of courses. While choice is important, this must be framed within a structure that ensures various topics and disciplinary perspectives are included.

The great risk of openness without boundaries is a fragmented, cafeteria-style selection of courses that has little high-level integration, order, or meaning. Public institutions have a legitimate normative responsibility to preserve, as well as to foster, the creation of new knowledge. Program incoherence is inconsistent with this mandate and the systematic inquiry of a research university. Moreover, diversity and creativity are not fostered in a state of program anarchy. It is a fallacy to think creativity emerges from chaos. Creativity emerges from purposeful and focused inquiry.

The advantage of a collaborative group of like-minded institutions such as COHERE is that there can be increased choice of courses with some assurance that the values and approaches (i.e., quality) are consistent and congruent. Most importantly, however, each institution can ensure structural integrity of the student's program. This will virtually eliminate issues of credit assessment and the potential chaos of multiple providers. Interestingly, the result will be greater openness to

change within inherently conservative organizations such as universities.

E-learning policy development will be able to ensure preservation and strengthening of traditional values, thereby reducing resistance to much needed change, including program integrity. Quality concerns have replaced the issue of the last century – access.

*Randy Garrison,  
a founding member of the COHERE consortium,  
and Academic Director,  
Learning Commons University of Calgary*

## **A College Perspective**

### **Ivan Filion**

It appears that there are three purposes to residency, the third of which is the most critical.

The first is an issue of dollars—the requirement for a payback to the institution that is granting the degree. This is particularly critical for alternative delivery units within colleges as the majority of these units operate on varying degrees of a cost-recovery model. As a result, the fewer the courses required for a program, the less revenue realized.

The second concern is around degree or diploma stacking, a situation where individuals could acquire multiple credentials through a “mix-and-match” approach. This concern could be addressed within each individual college by ensuring that the course/module/prior learning experience could only be used towards one credential.

The final concern is the one that bears the most consideration and reflects the heart of the academic view of residency. From an institutional perspective, the academic department must be confident a) with the level of rigor and understanding of the discipline and b) with the level of understanding of the culture of the department and the institution. The academic sees residency as a relationship requiring the institution to know the student, and the student to know the institution. This relationship can be developed within an online environment, and in the case of the Canadian Virtual College Consortium, with the coming together of like-minded institutions.

*The main purpose of residency is the establishment of a comfort level of knowledge and understanding between the institution and the student.*

*Ivan Fillion,  
founding member of Canadian Virtual College Consortium,  
and Acting President, Cambrian College*

## **Some Conclusions and Recommendations**

While the perspectives differ, it is clear that the three institutions (an open university, a traditional university, and a college) all recognize the impact of online learning on their policies and practices around transfer credit and residency, and the need to rethink existing protocols.

From an open university, the introduction of online learning builds upon existing mandates to make higher education accessible to all who wished to attend (Daniel, 1996).

*Athabasca University is dedicated to the removal of barriers that traditionally restrict access to and success in university-level studies and to increasing equality of educational opportunity for all adult Canadians regardless of their geographical location and prior academic credentials. In common with all universities, Athabasca University is committed to excellence in teaching, research and scholarship, and to being of service to the general public. (Athabasca University Mission Statement, May 1985)*

Existing AU policies, reflective of openness, flexibility, and portability, are enhanced by online learning, as is their teaching and learning environment with the new opportunities for interaction afforded by learning technologies.

From a traditional university perspective, the introduction of online learning has caused institutions to rethink how they approach and deliver education. Moreover, they recognize that online learning allows for quality, interactive learning to take place in a virtual space. Traditional universities involved in issues of access generally did so within a targeted approach.

Given this historical background, as traditional universities move into online learning, there is a need for policies and processes that ensure both mobility and program integrity.

From a college perspective, online learning enhances access to a diverse number of learning opportunities. However, it also provides challenges, including potential issues of lost revenue and diploma stacking. The major issue presented is the need to ensure academic rigour and a relationship between the credential granting institution and the student. Both the need for

rigour and a relationship can be addressed in an online environment.

These consortium models seem to offer a safe and small-scale venue for like-minded institutions to begin to address long-held positions and policies on transfer credit and residency. Participation in the consortia ranges from those institutions actively rethinking residency to those who are struggling to implement existing transfer credit agreements. These initiatives are congruent with the Government of Canada's innovation strategy, which links accessibility, flexibility, and portability of post-secondary education to national productivity.

Given the importance of portability of education, both to the individual learner and to the nation as a whole, concerted efforts must be expended by institutions and governments to ensure that Canadians receive all credit wherever credit is due. The following recommendations would accelerate the development of attitudes and policies to build maximum mobility and accessibility into Canada's post-secondary system:

**A national transfer credit database, with associated meta-data processes, should be developed to support transfer credit and student mobility across provinces and territories.**

**A national task force should be established to undertake ongoing activities to improve mobility and portability of learning—for instance, the development of innovative transfer credit protocols—and to develop common definitions and criteria for residency to be applicable across Canada.**

**Inter-institutional and inter-consortia initiatives should be supported in their efforts to increase accessibility, flexibility and portability of post-secondary education.**

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5. Canadian Virtual University, Purpose and Principles document.

6. Campus Canada Draft Memorandum of Agreement.

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## **APPENDIX A**

### **Summary of Proceedings Global Educators Network Seminars on Residency**

#### **Introduction**

Residency was the subject of 14 days of a Global Educators Network computer conference co-moderated by the Canadian Virtual University (CVU) and the Collaboration for Online Higher Education Research (COHERE). The discussions attracted 28 registrants, including scholars, academic administrators, and managers from British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Nova Scotia, and Norway. During the asynchronous event, many of the salient issues around residency emerged.

Alan Davis, Vice-President, Academic of Athabasca University and Chair of the CVU Advisory Committee, defined residency as a paramount issue in the way higher education treats the portability and acceptance of credit. Discussions focused on a number of topics:

- Online learning
- Support for residency within institutions and barriers to change
- New models of residency
- Related issues.
- A summary of the proceedings is provided below.

#### **Online learning**

The advent of online learning has given prominence to residency issues and the two are often paired. However, the policies for online courses and policies for residency are distinct and need not conflict. It is more accurate to say that challenges to residency requirements are part of a two-decade campaign for increased access, flexibility, and affordability in higher education.

Institutions accept without question their own online courses as a legitimate part of the student experience. An institution may

accept online learning from their own catalogue, but reject face-to-face transfer credits for residence obligations. The ease of access offered by online learning and the consequent rise in participants creates a new mass of student/customers. These learners both question residency themselves and are the sought-after clientele for whom residency may bar participation. These pressures of access, rather than any substantial equation between residency and technology-enhanced learning, seemed to drive the renewed consideration of residence policies.

#### Support for residency and barriers to change

Residency is integral to the majority of post-secondary institutions. The five following issues reflect the institutional perspective on the preservation of residency policies and the barriers to change. These are critical for institutions seeking to revisit their residency policies. The fourth and fifth points are discussed at length.

- **Economic concerns:** Tuition is revenue. Doing away with residency means foregoing tuition income, (where the economies of scale mean that costs are similarly reduced)
- **Planning issues:** “Patchwork” transcripts present a problem for academic planning. Without assured involvement for a certain proportion (usually the concluding) part, predicting demand and services becomes more difficult.
- **Student assessment:** Establishing competencies among diverse educational elements is an arduous job. This may be a matter of transfer credit rather than residency, but the residency policy establishes some limits on number and the extent of academic comparisons. One suggestion is that institutions will create new positions in learning evaluation and involve faculty to address Prior Learning Assessment, transfer credit, and the actual core learning of a program (those experiences which must be witnessed by the institution’s own faculty).
- **Academic rigor:** Proponents of residency contend that that a campus experience provides exposure to intellectual engagement, often outside class, which is of a different quality than in distributed learning. This exposure and the resulting interaction are “both intangible and real.” This brought forth interesting discussion. Participants concurred on the values of intellectual engagement, but disputed whether residency could ensure its occurrence. Inconsistencies in application were also noted as undermining the intellectual engagement argument.

There was some agreement that some professional education, including undergraduate programs, requires close observation of skills, which can only be achieved on-site. The institution granting a certificate has responsibilities to the public as well as to the students. This can be seen in areas such as health professions, teaching where graduation is tied to licensure.

It was noted that a similar argument is sometimes made for disciplines with neither crucial skills nor professional credentialing. The credential-granting institution maintains that its faculty must witness part (last year or two) of a program to ensure an acceptable level of functioning and the integration of components of learning, which may have occurred elsewhere. This argument for performance and for coherence sounds persuasive. However, in practice, few post-secondary programs, at the technical or university level, end in the kind of capstone project, which integrates and demonstrates knowledge.

- **Reputation:** Reputation is supposedly based on academic rigor, and the issues are entwined, but reputation is an issue of its own. Reputation is central in the competition for research funds, alumni dollars, star faculty, student enrollment, and recognition by graduate schools. This competition is not only nationwide, but also continental and global with U.S. and private institutions vying for prestige, students, and dollars.

Institutions seeking to enhance or at least protect their reputations will avoid granting credentials without some close-hand experience of the students. They want to ensure that the students subsequent activities will reinforce (or at least not damage) their reputation. Institutions understand that some of their traditional graduates may not serve them well, but this is seen as a worthwhile gamble, with a long-term relationship (90-120 credits over three or four years) affecting the odds. Reduction in residency requirements may be a higher stakes gamble.

### **New models for changing residency**

Three plausible scenarios for the evolution of residency are outlined:

- **Central agencies:** Agencies would be charged with pooling and allocating credits in return for the dismantling of

residency and transfer limitations. Such agencies might initially be provincial or have professionally specific jurisdiction: a national agency could eventually be developed. Such an institution— “Non-residential U” — would need recognition by graduate schools and professional groups.

- **Reduced residence requirements:** If residency is not to disappear in the next 10 years, it will almost surely change. Two-year requirements can change to one-year, the number of required courses reduced, and restrictions placed on key courses rather than on electives and general preparation courses.
- **Student-centered individual assessment:** For students who meet all but residency requirements, institutions might offer comprehensive exams, undergraduate thesis, or equivalent assessment. Such demonstrations of learning satisfy concerns for both general education competency and specialized or major knowledge.

### **Related issues**

Innovations that affect residency requirements are currently in process. Incremental change continues in response to economic, competitive, and public pressures. Residency will evolve in league with online learning and prior learning assessment.

Evaluation tools and methods need to be devised to assess course, credits, programs, and learners. These measures will do much for assuring the academic community and the general public that academic competence persists as requirements such as residency die away. Future programs may assume the legitimacy of transfer credit and be forced to defend residency requirements.

Articulation is most likely to occur first by jurisdictions (as noted above) and by similar institutions (wherein technical colleges, four-year institutions, and research universities each enter into agreements with their own kind and where cultural commonality bridges other distinctions).

In conclusion, the symposium explored many aspects of the residency issue. If it did not introduce startling new ideas (and that was not expected), it did air the current difficulties and ideas, and testified to the different initiatives going on throughout the country.

## APPENDIX B

### Consortia Approaches to Residency

**Canadian Virtual University (CVU)** members accept each other's courses for transfer credit, where courses meet program requirements. Not only have CVU members embraced this as part of their mandate, they have instituted practical steps that encourage students to look for courses from among the 13 partners that best meet their needs, their schedules, and their learning styles. Letter of Permission and Application fees are waived when students enrolled at one CVU partner and take a course with another partner. A single online form on the CVU website allows students to complete in one place what would typically require them to go to two universities and to fill out duplicate information.

In addition, members agree that where appropriate, these courses may also qualify as meeting the credential awarding institution's residency requirements.<sup>7</sup>

**Collaboration for Online Higher Education and Research (COHERE)** partners articulate a common goal aimed at improving student mobility. Institutional representatives have committed to the use of selected partner courses, and the co-development and cross-listing of new courses which could be used to satisfy the residency requirements at partner institutions. In addition, institutional representatives are committed to initiate seamless web-based processes to enable a student to combine offerings from different COHERE partners into a customized degree program.

**Canadian Virtual College Consortium (CVCC)** members agree in principle that no student will be disadvantaged by the residency requirements of participating colleges. Members agree that courses offered in a program by any partner, for which there is transfer credit, can also be used to satisfy the residency requirement of the accrediting institution.

**Campus Canada** is a national consortium of universities and colleges who are attempting to establish relaxed residency as one of the fundamental principles of its partnership. Campus Canada was established in response to an Industry Canada

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7. Canadian Virtual University, *Purpose and Principles* document.

request for proposals to establish a portal for federal government employees to access online post-secondary credentials, and added-value services such as credit banking, prior-learning assessment, maximum transfer credit options, and relaxed residency. In order for programs to be offered on the Campus Canada website and promoted to federal government employees, participating universities and colleges must “demonstrate that their programs offer learners maximum opportunities to transfer appropriate credits through relaxed, reduced, or low residency requirements for these programs.”<sup>8</sup>

Currently, programs on the Campus Canada pilot website have complied with the criterion in a number of ways: either by reducing existing residency requirements or by offering online programs that already have no or very low residency (e.g., OLA’s and Athabasca University’s Bachelor of General Studies degrees). Another Campus Canada partner, University College of Cape Breton (UCCB), has reduced residency requirements by one half for students who enroll via Campus Canada in its online Bachelor of Arts Community Studies. These students will be able to transfer up to 48 credit hours of courses from other universities and colleges toward the degree. Courses accepted for transfer must meet academic and program requirements. The remaining 42 credit hours of core courses must be taken through UCCB. This initiative provides a tremendous advantage to students and will serve as a test case for the university to see the effects of dramatically decreasing residency requirements.

At this time, Campus Canada has not quantified further what “relaxed, reduced, or low residency” might look like. They will be challenged to do so as more universities and colleges desire to have their online programs delivered to this potentially large market of learners.

Within **Campus Alberta**, Athabasca University will accept any course taken from an Alberta university, for which transfer credit is articulated, and can also be used towards their residency requirement for the Bachelor of Arts degree at AU.

Within **Campus Manitoba**, an agreement exists among the three provincial universities for approximately 70 courses. These courses may be used for both transfer credit and residency at the institution from which the students wish to graduate. Within this arrangement, students apply to one university (from which they intend to graduate and have designated as their home

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8. Campus Canada Draft Memorandum of Agreement.

university) and are simultaneously given visitor status at the other two institutions. Students may then take a range of courses (from a finite list) that are accumulated towards their degree, both in terms of transfer credit and residency.

Within **Campus Saskatchewan**, the College of Arts and Science at the University of Saskatchewan has initiated a three-year pilot to accept all courses designated as Campus Saskatchewan courses, and approved for transfer credit (where appropriate), as contributing to the residency requirements. This arrangement will be monitored closely over the coming years to ensure that the flexible approach to the residency requirement meets the needs of the students and facilitates completion of University of Saskatchewan degree programs. The University of Regina is working on a complementary initiative.